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Deception and Britain's road to war in Iraq

ABSTRACT

Ever since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there has been a widely shared public perception in the UK and beyond that the British government lied in making the case for war. One major theme has been the view that the Blair government lied about the strength of the intelligence about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the extent of the WMD capabilities claimed by that intelligence. A second theme that has received less attention has been the view that the Blair government lied in claiming that its actions at the United Nations (UN) were aimed at securing peaceful Iraqi compliance with its disarmament obligations. Instead, most think that the UK was actually committed to a policy of regime change by force and did not want the 'UN route' to produce a peaceful outcome. The article argues that the conceptual focus of the discussion needs to be broadened from lying to also considering deception by omission and deception by distortion as part of a campaign of organized political persuasion. It argues that, on the WMD intelligence, it is now apparent that a campaign of deceptive organized political persuasion was conducted by UK officials. With respect to the UN route, there is mounting evidence that the Blair government ran a campaign of deception on this issue as well to pave Britain's road to war in Iraq.

KEYWORDS

United Nations

Invasion of Iraq

Chilcot Inquiry

deception

organized political persuasion

weapons of mass destruction

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) or related programmes and production facilities were not found in Iraq after the invasion in 2003, there seems to have been a majority among the British public with the view that British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in concert with US President George W. Bush, jr, lied in various ways to pave the road to war. An opinion poll in September 2003 indicated that 59% of those polled thought that Blair had lied (Reuters 2003). Although the deliberate misspelling of Blair's name as 'Bliar' predates his association with Iraq, its use among journalists and campaigners has become much more widespread because of it (Rentoul 2010). The Imperial War museum's collection includes a poster produced in 2004 by the small left-wing British political party Respect that refers to Blair as 'Bliar' (Respect 2004). Journalists, political commentators and academics have sought to catalogue and document what they regard as the lies of Blair, Bush or both of them (e.g. Miller 2003; Scheer et al 2003; Kilfoyle 2007; Hasan 2010; Mearsheimer 2011). Nevertheless, Blair himself is unequivocal: 'I did not lie over Iraq' (quoted in Sky News 2005). Others have listed what they categorize as exaggerations and misreporting, showing the gap between what Blair said and what was true, without making claims about intentionality (e.g. Rangwala and Plesch 2004). The allegation of lying was also used in the Conservative Party's 2005 general election campaign in a billboard that said 'If he's prepared to lie to take us to war, he's prepared to lie to win an election' (quoted in Watt and White 2009). In January 2010, after Blair's evidence to the latest official British investigation into the war – the Iraq Inquiry, also known as the Chilcot Inquiry after its chair, which started in 2009 and completed its public hearings in 2011 but which still has not reported - even more (80%) thought Blair had lied. Only 11% thought he went to war because he thought Iraq had WMD: the main reasons people agreed with the allegation of lying were that he wanted to impress George Bush and the US (40%) and because he thought it was right (36%) (Owen 2010).

The allegations of lying relate to numerous elements of the period leading up to the war. This article considers two of the principal ones – 1) the Blair Government's representation of the intelligence on Iraq as certain that Iraq had a substantial and growing WMD capability and 2) its claim that the UK was sincerely seeking a peaceful resolution through the UN whilst, in fact, regime change through war had already been decided upon. Our focus is mainly on the latter question, which has been less widely discussed to date and we provide a brief summation of the current state of knowledge regarding the first question as it was the substantive issue with which the UN route was ostensibly meant to deal. Our objective with respect to the UN route question is to compare public positions with important official documents now available, mainly due to leaks, and thereby identify key issues that the forthcoming Chilcot Inquiry Report needs to deal with if it is to properly engage with the issue of deception and do a better job than all of the official reports that have preceded it. To achieve its objective, this article proceeds in four stages. First, relevant material from official inquiries and academic research is reviewed and shown to be lacking in conceptual development regarding deception and grounding in the empirical evidence that has become available in recent years. Second, we set out a conceptual framework we devised (Herring and Robinson forthcoming) in order to distinguish

non-deceptive from deceptive 'organized political persuasion'. Third, we provide a brief overview of the public position adopted by the Blair Government officials and Blair himself before the invasion and in their testimony to Chilcot regarding intelligence on Iraqi WMD and their approach to the UN route to dealing with the situation. Fourth, we apply our conceptual framework by way of a brief summary of the WMD intelligence issue, and then to a more detailed analysis comparing the testimony of officials to important contemporaneous documents regarding the UN route. In conclusion we summarize and reflect upon the grounds for our main arguments. On the WMD intelligence, it is now apparent that a campaign of deceptive organized political persuasion was conducted by UK officials. With respect to the UN route, there is mounting evidence that the Blair Government ran a campaign of deception on this issue as well in order to pave Britain's road to war in Iraq. The conclusion also discusses briefly the need for further academic research into these issues and for proper engagement with them in the forthcoming Chilcot Report.

OFFICIAL INQUIRIES AND THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

During the run up to the Iraq war the public position of the Blair government was that it was sure that Iraq had a substantial and growing WMD capability but that, if Iraq complied with the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions (SCRs), war would be averted and the regime would be allowed to remain in place. Although they made various limited criticisms of the Blair Government's actions and processes, the UK official inquiries since – by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC 2003), the government-appointed Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC 2003), Hutton (2004) and Butler (2004) – have not disputed the essentials of these narratives.

The academic literature has taken a wider range of positions but much analytical work remains to be done. Regarding intelligence and WMD, some of the literature shares the benign view of the official inquiries (Humphreys 2005) whilst others have focused on intelligence failures (Aldrich 2005) and psychological phenomena such as 'group think' in order to explain the public claims made regarding alleged Iraqi WMD (David and Perbo 2004). In general, however, many scholars have criticized the way in which intelligence was manipulated and used by politicians (e.g. Kettel 2008, Mearsheimer 2011), but without providing sufficient detail to support their claims or a conceptual framework that is adequate to differentiate between different forms of deceptive communication. Regarding the UN route, the older literature has generally argued that it was intended to be a way of starting the war rather than avoiding it. James Wither (2003-04) asserts that the UK probably had signed up to war while professing to be seeking peaceful compliance through the UN; Christoph Bluth (2004: 879) concluded that the UN route was intended to trigger war; Mark Danner (2005) sets out some of the evidence that the intention was war all along and that the UN route was a cover; and Alan Doig et al (2007) argue that the UK had signed up for war and deceived the public about what was really going on. In all of these cases, a conceptual framework regarding deception is not offered, detailed analysis of this specific issue is not provided and they did not have access to the many documents that have recently come to light or to Chilcot testimony and submissions. More recently, Kelly McHugh (2013: 481) concluded that Blair's public position that war could be averted through Iraqi compliance with the UN is belied by his knowledge that the United States

was already committed to regime change. However, the evidence provided is relatively thin with few materials from Chilcot being used and with the argument being a small part of a broader analysis about the limits of UK influence on the US. Writing relatively recently, Jason Ralph (2011: 313-315) accepts the British government's position. He argues that it was genuinely attempting to avert war in Iraq through persuading the US that, if Iraq complied with UN demands, the regime would have been successfully forced to change its character. However, nearly all of his evidence is from the retrospective testimony of Blair and David Manning (Blair's chief foreign policy adviser) during the Chilcot hearings and a memoir written by Jonathan Powell (Blair's Chief of Staff) and he pays minimal attention to the official documents now available. In contrast, this article compares the veracity of the claims of the Blair government with some of those documents.

It is widely anticipated that when it is published the Chilcot Report will be highly critical of Blair's decision-making processes (Owen 2013). However, whether it will include an explicit judgement on whether Blair and those close to him had deliberately deceived the public about the intelligence or their commitment to trying to achieve a peaceful resolution through the UN route remains to be seen. Publication of the Report has been stalled for two years over disagreement between Chilcot and the Cabinet Office regarding the disclosure of records of twenty five Notes and records of over 130 discussions between Blair and Bush and also minutes of over 200 Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings. In January 2011, the Cabinet Office informed Chilcot that it would not allow even redacted versions of the Bush-Blair Notes and discussion records to be published. In May 2014, the Cabinet Office at last agreed to consider publishing the 'gists' and quotes requested by Chilcot in July and August 2013. This was on the basis that Chilcot's 'use of this material should not reflect President Bush's views', as Chilcot put it, and that quotes should be used only to the extent necessary to substantiate the Report's conclusions (Chilcot 2014). The phrase 'not reflect President Bush's views' is odd and appears to mean that the gists and quotes had to not reveal anything about President Bush's views that is not already known. The Cabinet Office had previously agreed that Chilcot could make public only a few extracts from Cabinet and Cabinet Committee minutes that he thought were the most important. The Cabinet Office claimed that it did not want to prejudice future relations with the US, though former Ministers routinely reveal such materials in their memoirs. Blair and key members of his government could have recommended that the Cabinet Office release more Cabinet level and Blair-Bush papers but have chosen not to do, which has generated suspicions about their motives (Mason 2014).

The upshot of the limited release of documentation is that for the foreseeable future the public will only see what the Cabinet Office, the Chilcot panel and the Blair Government think they should see. So the question will remain as to whether those still secret materials would result in different conclusions being drawn about what happened. Is there a smoking gun where Blair admits that what he said about being certain about a growing Iraqi WMD threat was untrue? Or where he admits that he wanted to avoid a peaceful resolution through the UN so that there could be a war for regime change? We might never know, or not know for decades, unless the Chilcot Report tells us, there is a leak or an investigative journalist like Chris Ames (n.d.) is successful with a Freedom of Information (Fol) request. Five documents that are central to the argument in this article were leaked (Manning 2002; Meyer

2002; Rycroft 2002; UK CO 2002; UK DOS 2002): whether they would have been declassified through Chilcot is unclear.

Now that the Cabinet Office has responded to Chilcot's requests for gists and quotes from the papers, the inquiry will still have to go through the process known as 'Maxwellization', in which those who are criticized in the draft report are given an opportunity to respond before the Report is finalized and published, which could be a process lasting many months. In the meantime, the Chilcot panel has in its possession a large number of declassified documents which it could release but has chosen not to do so ahead of the publication of the final report (Ames 2014). The reasons given are that it is trying to 'avoid misinterpretation and to ensure the fair treatment of individuals' and that the report will provide necessary context (Iraq Inquiry FAQ n.d.; See also Chilcot 2013). However, the Chilcot panel should not be and will not be the arbiters of interpretation, fairness or context, and efforts to understand the documents should continue. An important part of that understanding is to develop the necessary conceptual tools, including in relation to deceptive and non-deceptive organized political persuasion, a task to which we now turn.

ORGANIZED POLITICAL PERSUASION: DECEPTIVE AND NON-DECEPTIVE

Whilst there is a substantial literature on lying and deception, there is surprisingly little engagement with the topic from political scientists, and sustained engagement with deception in politics is rare (e.g. Arendt 1971; Mearsheimer 2011; Carson 2012). There are also extensive literatures on themes related to what we have labelled 'organized political persuasion' (Herring and Robinson forthcoming), such as propaganda, strategic political communication, perception management and public relations, but which do not theorize deception and lying in any depth, whatever their other strengths (e.g. Corner 2007; Miller and Dinan 2008; Jowett and O'Donnell 2012). In view of these limitations, and in order to provide an adequate basis upon which to examine the issue of deception in politics, we developed a conceptual framework designed to distinguish between non-deceptive and deceptive organized political persuasion (Herring and Robinson forthcoming). We summarize the framework as follows.

Organized political persuasion refers to a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions in order to gain support for a policy. This goes beyond simply trying to inform an audience, as the aim is to get the audience to adopt a particular perspective about the information being presented to them. Organized political persuasion can be conducted honestly and without involving an effort to deceive. In the case of the UN route, if the aim really was to go the extra mile for peace – to try to find a way to restrain Iraq's WMD capabilities by getting it to comply with the relevant UN SCRs – then a campaign could have been run to convince the public non-deceptively that this was the right and prudent option to take. This would have been *non-deceptive organized political persuasion*, and this is what the Blair government and its officials claimed they did.

In contrast, *deceptive organized political persuasion* is trying to convince an audience in ways that are misleading in order to get them to adopt a particular view of something. This can involve *deception through lying* (making a statement one knows or suspects to be untrue in order to mislead), *deception through omission* (withholding information to make the viewpoint being promoted more persuasive) and *deception through distortion* (framing a statement in a deliberately misleading way to support the viewpoint being

promoted) (Herring and Robinson forthcoming). Being caught out in a blatant lie – with direct evidence of saying something and admitting to knowing it to be straightforwardly untrue – is potentially politically fatal for a politician or official. It is something they usually manage to avoid by using tactics of omission, distortion and obfuscation.

There is much to be said for using the still relevant and widely used term 'propaganda' (Google Scholar shows over 3000 items with 'propaganda' in the title published since 2010), not least to challenge the frequently euphemistic use of terms such as 'public affairs' and 'information management'. However, that that would require substantial work of clarification, as 'propaganda' is used in many ways, such as an inclusive, neutral term to cover all forms of organized political persuasion; a much narrower pejorative one to mean persuasion through deception for nefarious purposes; and an approach in which propaganda is communication aimed at one-sidedly benefiting the persuader (e.g. Jowett and O'Donnell 2012), to name just a few. Such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this article, which is concerned mainly with assessing the extent to which deception was used to pave Britain's road to war in Iraq. The taxonomy set out above allows for a focus on the question of whether the intelligence and the UN route were represented publicly by the Blair government both at the time and subsequently in a deceptive or non-deceptive way, and, if the latter, whether that deception involved lying, omission, distortion or all three. This approach forms part of a wider framework which still allows for the analysis of misperception and self-deception as part of the overall picture. Indeed, those who focus exclusively on misperception and self-deception neglect the issue of intentional and collective deception by those in power.

We now turn to providing an overview of the public position of the Blair government, articulated before the invasion and repeated in testimony to Chilcot, regarding the basis of their campaigns of organized political persuasion on WMD intelligence and the UN route.

THE PUBLIC POSITION: TRYING TO DEAL WITH A PROVEN, GROWING IRAQI WMD THREAT PEACEFULLY THROUGH THE UN

In their Chilcot testimony, key figures including Blair continued to assert the positions they articulated in public before the invasion: that, based on intelligence, they were confident that Iraq posed a serious and growing WMD threat, and that they were trying to defuse this threat peacefully through the UN. On the former point, when a member of the Chilcot panel asked Blair in 2010 'Was the intelligence telling you that the WMD threat from Iraq was growing?', Blair responded 'Yes [...] there were the September JIC [UK Joint Intelligence Committee] assessments that talked of continuing production of chemical weapons [...] and] I was told and specifically briefed about these mobile production facilities for biological weapons' (Blair 2010: 87-88. See also 91-92). On the latter point, Blair maintained that a peaceful resolution was always a possibility:

We did have to persuade them [- the US - to go down the UN route], although I think it is fair to say that, even at that meeting, President Bush made it clear that America would have to adjust policy if Saddam let the inspectors back in and the inspectors were able to function properly [...] at several occasions over the next few months,

President Bush made it clear to me that, if the UN route worked, then it worked. We would have had to have taken yes for an answer (2010: 50-51. See also 59, 93, 130, 157 and 167).

Similarly, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who served as the British Ambassador to the UN, stated the following with regard to UN SCR 1441 which declared Iraq to be in 'material breach of previous relevant SCRS and which offered Iraq a 'final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations' (UN 2002):

If Iraq recognised that the Security Council as a whole was setting out the alternatives in these terms, then it was more likely to complete its disarmament before the use of force was necessary. This concept - the setting of the terms in New York in such a way as to put maximum pressure on Saddam to concede without a fight - lay behind the UK approach all the way up to March 2003 (Greenstock 2009: 9).

On the one hand they may all have reported the truth. On the other hand they have had a powerful incentive to take this line: the alternative would be admit that they had lied about the UN route – that it was really a cover for a war and intended to build support and provide a legal justification for regime change. Christopher Meyer, British Ambassador to the United States, was an important exception to the public position in some respects, as we discuss later in this article.

That the United States was intent on regime change, whether by supporting a coup, conducting air strikes, or using US ground troops in an invasion, is well known. US conservatives had been openly committed to toppling Saddam Hussein throughout the 1990s. The Republican-controlled US Congress forced the official adoption of this position by Democratic President Bill Clinton. The 9/11 terrorist attacks were a crucial turning point. Those who were of the view that Saddam had to be removed by force if necessary to prevent even the slightest possibility that he might pass WMD to terrorists bent on attacking the United States came to the fore. They persuaded Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, Jr. of the correctness of their position. Although the US invaded Afghanistan first, from late 2001 the US was concentrating on regime change in Iraq through invasion (Battle 2010; Prados and Ames 2010).

In the next part of this article we draw upon the conceptual framework set out earlier in order to assess the issue of deception. The first section briefly focuses on the question of intelligence and WMD and provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on this issue. The second section focused on the less discussed and explored issue of deception and the UN route. Here we compare the public positions adopted by the Blair government during testimony to Chilcot with important official documents that have come to light on the relationship between the UN route and regime change.

DECEPTION OVER INTELLIGENCE AND WMD

As noted earlier, the bulk of debate regarding deception and the Iraq War has revolved around the question of whether the UK government lied with respect to the intelligence regarding Iraq's alleged WMD. Much of it has focused on the UK's controversial September 2002 dossier. Whilst there is now a degree of consensus around the idea that the UK government manipulated

intelligence in order to present Iraq as more threatening than it actually was, few accounts to date have reached satisfactory conclusions regarding the question of deception. In the years since the invasion of Iraq, however, sufficient evidence has now emerged which allows much firmer judgments on this matter (Herring and Robinson forthcoming). For example, documents released due to an FoI request revealed that the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee John Scarlett, who had been tasked with coordinating the production of the September dossier, sent a minute containing the suggestion that other countries of concern should be excluded from the early drafts of the dossier because '[t]his would have the benefit of obscuring the fact that in terms of WMD, Iraq is not that exceptional' (Scarlett 2002). This is a clear case of intention to deceive through omission. More generally, even the Butler Inquiry reached conclusions indicative of deception through both omission and distortion, noting that 'warnings were lost about the limited intelligence base' (Butler 2004: 454) upon which the dossier was based and that 'judgements in the dossier went to (although not beyond) the outer limits of the intelligence available' (Butler 2004: 82). Most importantly, senior officials including Blair involved in finalizing the dossier elected to use an unassessed piece of intelligence, received from a source on trial, and which was little or nothing more than a promise of evidence in the future of WMD production, in order to claim with certainty that Iraq was actively producing chemical and biological weapons and that these could be launched within 45 minutes of an order from Saddam (Herring and Robinson forthcoming). In doing so, officials distorted the available intelligence to make deceptive claims about the immediacy of the threat from Iraq. Overall, the case of the September dossier reflects a broader pattern of behaviour, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, whereby intelligence was manipulated through omissions and distortions so as to create the deceptive impression that policy-makers knew for sure that Iraq was a current WMD threat. In reality, the intelligence was limited and uncertain and, at best, suggested Iraq might become a credible WMD threat at some point in the future. This threat was what the UN route was supposedly to be aimed at dealing with peacefully.

DECEPTION OVER THE UN ROUTE AND REGIME CHANGE: THE PUBLIC POSITION AND OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS COMPARED

Nearly all of the documents drawn upon in this section of the paper emerged through leaks rather than declassification and all represent significant communications between the most senior officials involved in policy on Iraq. They represent the most informative documents drawn from a wider body of documentary evidence currently being researched by the authors. We compare the documents to the public position of the Blair Government in chronological order, an approach suited to understanding the unfolding dynamics.

Iraq: Options Paper: 'A legal justification for invasion would be needed [...] none currently exists [...] REGIME CHANGE has no basis in international law'

By March 2002, the emphasis in British policy options preparation was on invasion for regime change framed as the only possible route to dealing with Iraq. The leaked UK Defence and Overseas Secretariat's *Iraq: Options Paper*, dated 8 March 2002, shows that military action to remove Saddam from power had become central to UK thinking on Iraq (UK DOS 2002). It starts by stating

that UK policy since 1991 'has been to re-integrate a law-abiding Iraq which does not possess WMD or threaten its neighbours' but that this 'implicitly [...] cannot occur with Saddam Hussein in power' (UK DOS 2002: 1). The *Options Paper* concludes by stating that 'the use of overriding force in a ground campaign is the only option that we can be confident will remove Saddam and bring Iraq back into the international community'. Even though the paper shows that the United Kingdom was moving toward seeing forcible regime change as the only viable policy, it was not discussed in Cabinet and was not sent to all members of the Cabinet (Blair 2010: 22; Blair 2011: 10-13). This fact is indicative of deception through omission in that, at this stage of policy formulation, Blair kept some members of his Cabinet in the dark as to the direction of UK policy. Indeed, it is deception through omission generally of the public and parliament.

Richard Dearlove, head of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6), had raised the issue of the legality of invading Iraq in his 3 December 2001 declassified letter to Manning: 'Government law officers to provide assurances of *legality* [emphasis in original] (there has been a serious problem here)' (Dearlove Private Secretary 2001: 4). Several paragraphs of the *Options Paper* are dedicated to this issue, including this one:

A legal justification for invasion would be needed. Subject to Law Officers advice, none currently exists. This makes moving quickly to invade legally very difficult. We should therefore consider a staged approach, establishing international support, building up pressure on Saddam, and developing military plans (UK DOS: 1).

The *Options Paper* did not say that the grounds for wanting to invade were legal and that this needed to be explained to the public. If they had, this would have been non-deceptive organized political persuasion. If instead they thought that what they wanted to do was illegal and they had to find a legal 'justification' in the sense of a legally valid but false rationalization to hide their real goal, this would have been deception by lying. The *Options Paper* notes that 'REGIME CHANGE [caps in original] has no basis in international law', that there was no recent evidence of Iraqi involvement in terrorism, and that, at that time, action could only be justified if the UN Security Council found Iraq to be in breach of the Gulf War ceasefire SCR 687 (UK DOS 2002: 8-9). Regarding a ground campaign to remove Saddam it concludes:

To launch such a campaign would require a staged approach: [...] A refusal to admit UN inspectors, or their admission and subsequent likely frustration, which resulted in an appropriate finding by the Security Council could provide the justification for military action. Saddam would try to prevent this, although he has miscalculated before (UK DOS 2002: 9).

Hence the *Options Paper* presents a policy of regime change and then discusses the ways in which it can be achieved, in particular by gaining legal cover by going through the UN. There is no discussion of using the UN route in order to achieve Iraqi disarmament peacefully. It strongly indicates that a policy of regime change emerged first, and was then followed by a decision to go through the UN in order to provide legal cover and also build public and

international support. There was no deception about the legality of regime change. However, and at best, there was deception through omission in concealing the purpose of the UN route.

Manning to Blair: 'I said you would not budge in your support for regime change'

In preparation for Blair's visit to Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas in April 2002, Manning sent Blair a memo on 14 March 2002 about a dinner he had with Bush, Condoleezza Rice (US National Security Advisor) and Meyer. This leaked memo reads:

I said that you would not budge in your support for regime change but you had to manage a press, a Parliament and a public opinion that was very different from anything in the States. [...] The issue of the weapons inspectors must be handled in a way that would persuade European and wider opinion that the US was conscious of the international framework, and the insistence of many countries on the need for a legal base. Renewed [sic] refused [sic] by Saddam to accept unfettered inspections would be a powerful argument (Manning 2002).

He could have said 'you would not budge in your support for disarming Iraq, even if it took regime change to achieve it'. One reason he did not could have been that the primary objective was regime change, rather than disarming Iraq even if it left Saddam in power. Furthermore, this memo indicates that regime change had already been decided upon. Again, this is at the very least deception through omission in that the public, parliament and most of the Cabinet were not informed about the degree of UK commitment to supporting regime change.

Meyer to Manning: 'we backed regime change [...] I went through the need to wrongfoot [sic] Saddam on the inspectors and the UN SCRs'

The priority being given to using the UN route to facilitate forcible regime change was understood by senior British officials, and underlined in interactions with the Bush administration. Meyer's 18 March memo to Manning - also leaked - regarding a meeting he had the previous day with US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz took the same line as that used by Manning:

On Iraq I opened by sticking very closely to the script that you used the [sic] Condi Rice last week. We backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option. It would be a tough sell for us domestically, and probably tougher elsewhere in Europe. The US could go it alone if it wanted to. But if it wanted to act with partners, there had to be a strategy for building support for military action against Saddam. I went through the need to wrongfoot [sic] Saddam on the inspectors and the UN SCRs [...] (Meyer 2002: See also Meyer 2009: 47-48).

A sincere commitment to using the UN route to disarm Iraq peacefully would have involved trying to get Saddam on the right path, not trying to wrong-foot

him. If the sole purpose of the UN route was to trigger war then this was deception through lying. If an element of commitment was retained to working for and accepting peaceful disarmament leaving the regime in place, then the picture was more one of deception through distortion due to lack of admission of the mixed motives.

Blair to Powell: 'the immediate WMD problems don't seem obviously worse than 3 years ago'

During this period intelligence officials and policy makers discussed publishing WMD intelligence in order to mobilize public support for action against Iraq but they were concerned by the lack of a credible threat from Iraqi WMD (Herring and Robinson forthcoming). In a now declassified memo to Powell dated 17 March, one of the reasons Blair gives for lack of support on the 'centre-left' for invading Iraq is that that 'the immediate WMD problems don't seem obviously worse than 3 years ago' (Blair 2002a). He gave no hint of disagreeing with that assessment and, as demonstrated below, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw certainly did not and indicated this explicitly to Blair. Instead, Blair concludes that 'we have to re-order our story and message' and suggests that they 'should be about the nature of the regime'. When asked about the immediate WMD problems not seeming worse and re-ordering the story at Chilcot, Blair said 'it was the case following September 11th, it wasn't that he was doing any more than he had been before. It was that our assessment of the risk of allowing him to do anything had changed' (2011: 44-45. See also Blair 2010: 31-32). Nevertheless, the public position of Blair and his Government was still one of portraying a growing threat in terms of Iraq's WMD capabilities, as shown in the previous section on intelligence and WMD, rather than just a new unwillingness to tolerate possession of WMD by Saddam's repressive regime or run a risk, however improbable, of him passing them on to terrorists. Blair had articulated this underlying concern publicly but did not say explain the extent of its role in driving policy, which suggests deception by omission and distortion.

Straw to Blair: 'we may want credibly to assert that regime change is an essential part [...] of the elimination of Iraq's WMD capacity'

The problem with finding an alternative justification for war was that no potential legal grounds existed other than those pertaining to the UN SCRs related to Iraqi WMD. It was widely understood in the Blair Government that there were no legal grounds for armed action against Iraq either on the basis of humanitarian intervention or in terms of any terror threat (UK DOS). Accordingly, on 25 March, eight days after Blair's memo to Powell, Straw spelled out to Blair in a declassified memo the importance of justifying the Iraq war through reference to international law and WMD, while accepting in a matter of fact way that that the WMD threat had not increased:

If 11 September had not happened, it is doubtful that the US would now be considering military action against Iraq. In addition, there has been no credible evidence to link Iraq with UBL [Usama bin Laden] and Al Qaida. Objectively, the threat from Iraq has not worsened as a result

of 11 September. What has now changed is the tolerance of the international community (especially that of the US) (Straw 2002: 2).

Straw notes the difficulty of justifying military action in terms of international law but then emphasizes that doing precisely that was essential:

That Iraq is in flagrant breach of international legal obligations imposed on it by the UNSC provides us with the core of a strategy, and one which is based on international law. Indeed, if the argument is to be won, the whole case against Iraq and in favour (if necessary) of military action, needs to be narrated with reference to the international rule of law (2002: 2-3)

Straw (2002: 2) then discusses the importance of the readmission of weapons inspectors with respect to both 'public explanation' and 'in terms of legal sanction for any subsequent military action'. Referring to them as legal 'elephant traps', he sets out two points - that 'regime change *per se* [emphasis in original] is no justification for military action' and the question of whether another UN SCR would have to be passed before force could be used (2002: 2-3). Regarding regime change, he elaborates thus:

Of course, we may want credibly to assert that regime change is an essential part of the strategy by which to achieve our ends – that of the elimination of Iraq's WMD capacity: but the latter has to be the goal (2002: 2).

He frames the argument for regime change as being indispensable to disarm Iraq of WMD not as the reality of the situation but something that the Government could choose to assert and could do so in a way that people are likely to believe. The framing seems to be one of legally convenient rationalization rather than genuine rationale – deception about motives rather than honest articulation of motives. The framing is not 'We must explain to the public our real position – we do not want them to misunderstand or to be misled by our opponents' It can be seen from these quotes that the advice offered to Blair by Straw is presented in terms of employing the UN route as a way of justifying military action legally and not in terms of achieving the peaceful disarmament of Iraq. If so, Straw was advising Blair to deceive the public via omission and distortion.

Iraq: Conditions for Military Action: 'an ultimatum could be cast in terms which Saddam would reject [...] and which would not be regarded as unreasonable by the international community'

One of the difficulties of knowing exactly what happened when Blair stayed at Bush's Crawford ranch on 7-8 April 2002 is that they spent substantial amounts of time together without advisers or note-takers present (Meyer 2009: 28-29), although it is plausible that the US government secretly recorded everything. In a speech in Texas on 8 April at the George Bush, sr. Presidential Library, Blair (2002b) repeatedly linked 9/11, terrorism, regime change, WMD and Iraq:

we must be prepared to act where terrorism or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threaten us [...] Not just by military means but by disrupting [...] the bankrollers of the trade in terror and WMD [...] If necessary the action should be military and again, if necessary and justified, it should involve regime change [...] Where countries are engaged in the terror or WMD business, we should not shirk from confronting them. [... S]ponsoring terrorism or WMD is not acceptable. [...] Leaving Iraq to develop WMD [...] is not an option. The regime of Saddam is detestable [...] To allow WMD to be developed by a state like Iraq without let or hindrance would be grossly to ignore the lessons of September 11 [...].

According to Meyer (2009: 29), this was the first time, to his recollection, that Blair had referred publicly to regime change. Many think that Blair gave a firm, personal assurance at Crawford to Bush about his support for regime change. This would have been in line with the internal British focus as of March 2002. As confirmed by Meyer at Chilcot (2009: 37-48) in testimony that conflicts with the Blair government's official position, the UN route was aimed not at avoiding war but making war for regime change possible with UN authorization and British participation:

the attitude of Downing Street was this: it was a fact that there was a thing such as the Iraq Liberation Act. It was a fact that 9/11 had happened and it was a complete waste of time, therefore, in those circumstances, if we were going to be able to work with the Americans, to come to them and say any longer – and bang away about regime change and say, “We can’t support it”, and the way I think the attempt was made to square the circle of supporting something to which the Foreign Office, and maybe other lawyers objected, was actually so to wrap it, so to contextualise it, that regime change, if and when it happened, would be with the benefit of the support of the international community in the framework of UN action (Meyer 2009: 41).

The fact that the UN route was not about averting war but precipitating and enabling British involvement in it was underlined in a leaked Cabinet Office briefing paper dated 12 June 2002 and titled *Iraq: Conditions for Military Action* (UK CO 2002):

It is just possible that an ultimatum could be cast in terms which Saddam would reject (because he is unwilling to accept unfettered access) and which would not be regarded as unreasonable by the international community. However, failing that (or an Iraqi attack) we would be most unlikely to achieve a legal base for military action by January 2003.

This framing is not what one would expect from a sincere effort at disarming Iraq peacefully through the UN. Such an effort would be focused on casting an ultimatum in terms which Saddam was most likely to accept, not in terms it was hoped he would reject and be seen to be unreasonable in doing so. The proposal is clearly one of, at a minimum, proposing deception through distortion and would be deception through lying if the aim was wholly to prevent a peaceful resolution while publicly claiming otherwise.

Rycroft to Manning: 'Military action was now seen as inevitable [...] The NSC had no patience with the UN route'

US determination to go to war and its lack of interest in the UN route are reflected in the leaked 'Downing Street memo' from Matthew Rycroft, Blair's Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs, to Manning. Dated 23 July 2002, this memo reported on the recent visit of Dearlove to Washington:

There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC [US National Security Council] had no patience with the UN route [...].

The memo also reiterated Straw's concerns over the need to strengthen the case, including the legal case, for attacking Iraq:

It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action [...] But the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran. We should work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the UN weapons inspectors. This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force.

The memo also refers to Blair's views regarding finding a legal justification for war: 'The Prime Minister said that it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors'. A summary of Blair's comments is posed entirely in terms of the UN route being used to facilitate military action:

Regime change and WMD were linked in the sense that it was the regime that was producing the WMD. There were different strategies for dealing with Libya and Iraq. If the political context were right, people would support regime change. The two key issues were whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan the space to work.

The memo concludes with a number of references to the United Kingdom working up an ultimatum to Saddam, the need to pay attention to legal issues and an assumption that the United Kingdom would be involved in military action. As with all of the previous documentation analyzed above, the UN route is discussed entirely in terms of systematically and deceptively creating the political and legal support for attacking Iraq, as opposed to achieving disarmament through peaceful means. Hence there seems to be a consistent pattern of deception through omission and distortion.

CONCLUSION: DECISION, DOCUMENTS AND DECEPTION

The public position of the Blair government at the time and subsequently has been that they were trying to deal with a proven and growing Iraqi WMD threat peacefully through the UN if at all possible, and then through UN-authorized force if necessary. Awareness that the US was intent on regime change became evident in November 2001. That UK policy was hardening in

March 2002 around a policy of supporting the US in regime change is indicated by the *Options Paper* and summaries of conversations between Manning and US officials and then Meyer and US officials. In the same month, Blair noted to Powell without demur that the centre-left view was that the WMD threat from Iraq had not increased. Indeed, a minute from Scarlett, who coordinated the production of the dossier on Iraqi WMD published in September, proposed de-emphasizing comparison with other states to obscure the fact that Iraq was not more of a threat than them. For his part, Blair emphasized to Powell the repressive nature of the regime and his attitude of decreased tolerance for such regimes in relation to WMD after 9/11. Only after this, late in the same month, does the issue of the UN route start to emerge with clear guidance from Straw to Blair that forcible regime change, illegal as a primary objective, had to be framed as necessary to achieve UN-mandated disarmament of Iraq. The Cabinet Office briefing paper in June 2002 articulated the hope that a disarmament ultimatum could be found that Saddam would reject and that the international community would perceive as a reasonable one so that an invasion could be launched. By July, the view of Rycroft and Dearlove was that a US invasion of Iraq was inevitable, with pursuit by the UK of the UN cover that would let the UK support the invasion, whether diplomatically or militarily, something the US would tolerate reluctantly. The finalization of the dossier in September involved strengthening the claims about intelligence-based certainty regarding Iraqi WMD capabilities, even though the basis of that claim was unassessed intelligence from an unproven source that was mainly or wholly a promise of intelligence in the future. Overall, there is compelling evidence that deception occurred over the intelligence, and the review of key documents here regarding the UN route provides a strong initial finding that officials were deceptive with respect to both their intentions regarding regime change and the possibility of averting war via the UN route. In his testimony to Chilcot (2010: 90), Blair said:

[...] this isn't about a lie or a conspiracy or a deceit or a deception, it is a decision, and the decision I had to take was, given Saddam's history, given his use of chemical weapons, give the over 1 million people whose deaths he had caused, [sic] given ten years of breaking UN Resolutions, could we take the risk of this man reconstituting his weapons programmes, or is that a risk that it would be irresponsible to take?

The problem for Blair is that the case for war in Iraq was not made primarily on that basis, i.e. the regime's past record and the future risk of reconstituted WMD programmes. He could not make the case on those grounds because such a war would not be legal and would not attract public or parliamentary support, and he knew it. This is why, as set out earlier, Blair and his officials made the public case for war in terms of being certain, based on intelligence, of a growing Iraqi WMD capability and in terms of a sincere attempt to use the UN route to disarm Iraq peacefully, even if it left the regime in place. As we have shown, however, the documents reviewed here do not support these public claims as representative of the internal deliberations of the Blair government. Instead, they indicate a war aimed at regime change, with the intelligence pointing to a very limited WMD capability and with the UN route being used to make that war more likely. In sum, the documents discussed in this paper provide strong indications that

Britain's road to war was paved with deception. Important questions require further investigation. While it is clear that the peaceful UN route was not meant to work, was this primarily because they had already decided regime change was necessary to disarm Iraq? Or was it because they wanted to invade mainly for other reasons? The official line is that it was regime change to disarm Iraq. If the regime change was mainly for other purposes then this was another example of deception. Even if WMD disarmament was the primary motive, claiming publicly to be pursuing the UN route to peaceful disarmament while privately having no faith in it and indeed trying to make sure it did not work so that a war could be launched is still deception. Other issues for further research are how they went about making sure that the peaceful route did not work and comparing in much greater depth statements made to Chilcot and the documentary record. All of this needs to be brought together through identification of the omission, distortion and lying dimensions of the deception. It is vital that the Chilcot Report and further academic research establish the full extent, nature, purposes and limits of that deception.

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